KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY THE PREMIER OF LIMPOPO, DR PHOPHI RAMATHUBA, AT THE ENTREPRENHER REGIONAL WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT SUMMIT AND MARKET ACCESS EXPO

17 NOVEMBER 2026 | POLOKWANE, LIMPOPO PROVINCE

Programme Director,
TUT's Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, Innovation and Engagements Dr Vathi Papu-Zamxaka
UN Women South Africa Country Office Representative Ms Aleta Miller
Representative of the De Beers Group
Our revolutionary sisters and brothers visiting us from across Southern Africa - most notably from our sister nations of Namibia and Botswana,
Policymakers and Leaders from the Private Sector and Academia,
Extraordinary Women Entrepreneurs,
Distinguished Guests
Members of the Media
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Avuxeni, Goie More, Good Morning, Ndi matsheloni, Silotshile, Thobela!

It is with profound joy, deep humility and revolutionary pride that I welcome you all to Limpopo - the beating heart of the North, and today, the undisputed capital of women's economic empowerment in Southern Africa.

We gather here under a powerful and urgent theme: "Empowering Women, Transforming Economies: Building Resilient, Innovative, and Sustainable Enterprises Across Southern Africa."

Let me begin by expressing our heartfelt gratitude to the UN Women Southern Africa Multi-Country Office (SAMCO), the De Beers Group and the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) Centre for Entrepreneurship Development for convening this premier regional gathering right here in Polokwane.

When people ask us, what government is doing to grow our economy and what role our partnerships with academic institutions play, my answer is simple: Look around this room. Today, we are not sitting in an ivory tower talking about theory; thanks to TUT, we are connecting academic research directly with the lived, breathing reality of our entrepreneurs. You have taken theory and turned it into a practical blueprint for survival and success.

Honouring Regional Leadership and Our Living Legacy

Looking across this auditorium, I am reminded that we stand on giant shoulders. The South African women entrepreneurs gathered here carry the indestructible baton handed to us by Mama Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Albertina Sisulu and the heroic

women of the 1956 march. You are the modern-day foot soldiers of economic liberation.

And how our horizons are expanding! We look across our borders with immense pride. We are inspired by the rising tide of women's political and economic leadership across our region - the formidable leadership of women in the Presidency of Namibia and the brilliant young women making their mark in Botswana's cabinet and legislature. When women rise in Pretoria, Windhoek and Gaborone, the entire SADC region rises with them!

Here in Limpopo, the power of women is deeply honoured, celebrated and sharpened daily. We know that if you want a community to thrive, you invest in its women.

Limpopo's Geographic Advantage and the SADC Lifeline

Programme Director, we meet at a critical time in global trade. Questions are constantly raised about the stability of international trade agreements - such as the looming uncertainties surrounding AGOA. But let me tell you this afternoon: Limpopo is ready.

Geographically, Limpopo is not merely the northern province of South Africa; we are South Africa's premier northern gateway to the SADC region. Our province sits at the vital crossroads of African trade corridors, rich in mining, agriculture, tourism and industrial potential.

In an unpredictable global economic landscape, where traditional Western trade agreements can be altered or cancelled with a stroke of a pen, our ultimate saving grace is South-to-South trade. Our geographic advantage within SADC is our greatest shield. By strengthening intra-African trade, deepening regional value chains and opening robust commercial corridors with Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Namibia and beyond, we insulate our economies against external shocks. We do not need to look across the oceans for our salvation; our salvation lies right here, among ourselves, trading, building and growing together as Africans.

Bridging the Gap: What Government is Doing in Limpopo

For too long, women-owned enterprises have faced systemic exclusion - locked out of commercial markets, struggling with access to finance, and hamstrung by administrative red tape.

We have heard your cries and we are acting. Through our Department of Economic Development, Environment and Tourism (LEDET), we have moved away from endless talk to concrete programmatic execution:

Through the Limpopo Township and Rural Business Support Programme, we have supported a total of 1,037 start-up enterprises in this financial year alone. Crucially, Women-Owned Enterprises account for 337 of these beneficiaries - alongside our youth

and people with disabilities. We are putting essential business equipment directly into the hands of women to boost their operational capacity and competitiveness.

Through our Economic Empowerment Outreach Programme, we are going on-site to assist local enterprises with funding applications, working capital hurdles and Central Supplier Database (CSD) compliance. We discovered that too many brilliant women failed to secure government opportunities simply because their CSD profiles were poorly configured. We are fixing those bottlenecks.

We have established the Provincial Enterprise Development and Support Technical Committee to stop government departments from working in silos, eliminating duplication, and leveraging every available cent.

And through our strategic partnership with the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) Enterprise Accelerator Programme, we are actively scaling operational women-owned enterprises to create sustainable, high-impact jobs.

Furthermore, we welcome the historic launch at this summit of the three flagship knowledge products from the G20 FIWE 2025 conference - cementing our province and country as global leaders in research-backed financial inclusion for women.

Through the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, we continue to support women farmers with infrastructure, mechanisation, production inputs, skills development and market access. Enterprises such as Nemabaka Poultry, Katshi-Malala Farming and Sekgale Trading demonstrate how targeted government investment can create jobs, strengthen rural economies and unlock entrepreneurial potential.

We have also facilitated market access for 83 agribusinesses, conducted 21 SA GAP readiness audits and supported initiatives that connect women producers and agro-processors to local and international markets. However, production without access to sustainable markets cannot deliver meaningful economic empowerment.

We must strengthen partnerships between government, universities, financial institutions and the private sector to expand access to finance, technology, infrastructure, innovation and procurement opportunities.

Our existing partnership with Tshwane University of Technology provides an important platform for advancing agricultural research, innovation and enterprise development.

A Clarion Call for the Road Ahead

Let me be clear: government resources are limited. We cannot do this alone. That is why platforms like this, bringing together the private sector, academia, financial institutions, and civil society, are so vital. We must build a critical mass.

As we look to the next financial year, I want to reaffirm our commitment: LEDET is working to secure additional budget allocations specifically targeted at expanding

developmental support for Women-Owned Enterprises. Investing in women-led businesses is not charity; it is a direct, hard-headed investment in the industrialization of Limpopo's economy.

To the women entrepreneurs gathered here: do not shrink. Take up space. Forge unbreakable regional partnerships, leverage our SADC trade gateways and show the world that when you empower a woman economically, you eradicate poverty, lift families and transform entire nations.

Let us make this summit a turning point. Let us build resilient, innovative and sustainable enterprises across Southern Africa!

Pula! I thank you.